



At a typical stop in his widespread parish, Pastor McClure chats with Chester Stewart, Roscoe Stewart, and Walter Thompson.

# The Stranger Who Stayed

He was "crossways to everything," Robert McClure admits, when he first came to the Kentucky hills. Some didn't like his preaching. Others thought he was a "foreigner." But he didn't know when he was licked, and fourteen fine churches in Owsley and Lee counties are the result.

By JANETTE HARRINGTON

ONE SUNDAY the Reverend Robert McClure of the Ows-Lee Larger Parish, Kentucky, was driving a load of men, women, and children to church at Sugar Camp in his four-wheel-drive station wagon. Off the highway, on a narrow, rutted mountain road, the jeep got stuck in the mud. Passengers piled out, while the pastor tried to rock the jeep loose. Watching him, one of the men drawled, "Do you reckon he'll make it?"

"I dunno," his neighbor replied, "but that preacher's shore hard to stick for long."

This sums up the history of Bob McClure's eleven years in the Kentucky mountains, beginning in 1940 right after his graduation from Princeton Theological Seminary. City-bred—he comes from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—and educated for a city ministry, he first went to Owsley County as pastor of the churches at Cow Creek and Indian Creek, about six miles from Booneville, the county seat. Now he is the leader of a National Mis-

sions larger parish that includes fourteen small churches in Owsley and Lee Counties—eleven of them Presbyterian U.S.A., three Presbyterian U.S., thirteen white, and one Negro. He works with a staff of two assisting ministers—Boaz Smith and John Turner—and, since August first, a director of Christian education, Elizabeth Bulger. During the school year, Joe Powlas, of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, comes one hundred seventy miles to lend a hand.

The schedule of services, Sunday school, young people's meetings, choir practice, session meetings, parish council, daily vacation Bible school, and pas-

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Pastor McClure reads Scripture at pulpit of church in Booneville, county seat of Owsley County. This is one of the fourteen churches in Robert McClure's parish.

toral calls. is a staggering load for the small staff. Too, since McClure has been there he has supervised, self-taught, the building of a manse, a garage-apartment, and two church buildings; and he takes care of four cars—two big buses, the jeep, and a passenger car. When he determined to go into National Missions work in the southern mountains, someone asked him if there weren't as many souls to be saved in the city. "Yes," he replied, "but out there we haven't as many trying to save them."

Bob McClure believes the people of the Kentucky mountains have unlimited possibilities provided they have the opportunities, and points with pride to the large numbers of young people and adults who go from his churches each year to find useful lives in the cities of Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan.

In his years in the mountains, Bob has had experiences to dampen the spirit of a less hardy soul; but the sturdily built and sturdy-minded young man (he's thirty-seven, black-haired, and blue-eyed) has weathered them all with good cheer. He was a boxer in college, if that is symbolic.

From 1945 to 1950, at public insistence after the veterans got back from the war and some of them started whooping it up a bit, he served as police judge. One of the most unpleasant experiences of this term of office resulted when it became

necessary to indict a young man of the community for perjury. These charges were made because witnesses were found to prove that he had not told the truth in a trial for drunkenness in which he had been acquitted. The day after the young man discovered that an indictment had been returned against him in the circuit court, he walked up to the town marshal as he stood talking to two truck drivers about a load of coal, and fired four times, killing him instantly.

The case was tried three times before out-of-county juries, partly because no eye-witnesses to the actual shooting could be found, partly because so much irrelevant testimony concerning the dead man was permitted in the court. In the third trial McClure testified, and a conviction was obtained. Prior to the trial anonymous letters were written accusing McClure of "having had a man murdered." and asking for his dismissal by the church. Investigation by a representative of the Board of National Missions revealed that McClure had strong support both from his session and the Town Board of Booneville.

Then there was the returned Navy veteran who looked up Mac to say, "I've been anxious to meet you. You're the only man in the county I haven't heard criticized since I came back."

But this kind of a vote of confidence is a Johnny-come-lately. When Bob Mc-

Clure first got to Kentucky, he says, he was "crossways to everything." As more than one student of ethnology has pointed out, the mountain people are self-contained, and very much attached to their traditions. With the greatest will in the world to love and serve them, it takes a while to "learn the people," as the mountaineers themselves put it.

In the early days of the war, McClure preached a sermon suggesting that war is unchristian and offered a prayer for the enemy, in the spirit of Matthew 5:44. A couple of days later he overheard himself described as "that . . . who prayed for the German people." It was the beginning of a first-class whispering campaign that, before it ended two or three years later, had him a fifth columnist sending secret radio messages and brought a state trooper up to investigate. Eventually, on the advice of friends, he stopped it by running a statement in the local paper, beginning, "It has been rumored that I am a German, a fifth columnist, and some other unpatriotic things." whereupon he answered each accusation, proving his Scotch-Irish ancestry, Christianity, and Americanism. Some people looked sheepish for a few days, but that put an end to it.

### *The out-of-doors*

As for church services, McClure believes that the traditional mountain custom of having many religious services out-of-doors has much to do with the habit that many of the men and boys have of staying outside of the "church house," while the women folk are inside. While reverence is the rule in the church services, occasionally at revival meetings where large numbers are assembled the talking gets quite loud, and now and then a firecracker or a pistol may pop. Once when a drunken man was cursing so loud that it drowned out the Lord's Prayer, Mac stopped the service and went outside. "You know there's a stiff penalty for disturbing a church service," he warned, "and I won't hesitate to indict you if you don't quiet down."

There is another reason why it is hard to get men into the church. Many men feel that Christianity requires a man to be good *before* he joins the church, else he'd be a hypocrite. It's taking a while to teach some of them that by taking Christ as they are, they can become better men *after* joining the church.

It's also taking a while to accustom them to McClure's sedate Presbyterian sermons, but there are already quite a few who say that he is a "good talker." For those who like their preaching with all the stops out, McClure's solution is



simply to preach what he believes, but say it good and loud.

Once they have become Christians, there is no limit to the devotion of the mountain people. Take Aunt Marg for example. A widow with eight children, she supported her family for years by doing laundry, making the long walk daily to town. She lives close to one of the churches, and for many years has seen that the church is cleaned for the service. Not long ago she asked the minister to come over for a memorial meeting at the family burial ground on top of the hill behind her house. It's a steep hill, and when he got there he said jocularly, "Well, Aunt Marg, do you think you can make it?"

"Law', child," she retorted, "I've been up there three times already this morning to see if everything is all right."

With Bob McClure I visited another family up the valley. The man and his wife were taking a breather between stints of hoeing, and we sat on the front porch and talked, about the weather (dry) and the crops (sparse)—and about their son who had been injured in Korea. With infinite patience and infinite sweetness, the mother sighed, "Sometimes it seems to me I can hardly hit a straight row." There, I thought, speaks any mother anywhere.

### ***A real contribution***

What religion contributes to these mountain people is more than personal spiritual satisfaction. The clothing boxes sent to Booneville by interested churches have been a godsend for many families. Parents often say to Mrs. McClure, "We just don't know how we'd get along without these clothes." In keeping with mountain independence and the McClure feeling that it's better that way, most articles are sold at auction for a small fraction of the real value. Frequently they fill a desperate need as when families are "burned out" or some sickness or hardship depletes a meager income. Sometimes a child will come with a cardboard pattern or a torn strip of rag saying, "I want a pair of shoes just this long." And the sales, held on Saturdays and court days, net a much needed \$1500 to \$2000 a year, which helps to purchase equipment for the parish. Donors might be aghast to see their Saks Fifth Avenue topper sold for a quarter, or a Mr. Johns hat for a nickel; but it can't be denied the numbers add quite a bit to the general style.

One family, discovered up a "holler" in desperate straits—one little fellow wore only an undershirt though it was a bitterly cold day—was brought to the manse, dumped in the tub, dressed in clean clothes, given apples and toys, and lodged for the night in the county jail until friends and relatives were found to care

for them. Going down the street with her brood the mother exclaimed, "They shore don't look like the same younguns. Right purty, ain't they?" Members of this family now attend Sunday school regularly.

This mixture of faith and life was pretty well summed up by a stooped old man who recently rededicated his life and began to attend church. After the first supper meeting he said, "Preacher. I never had such a good time in my life. Everybody so nice. Everybody so polite. Nobody drunk—nobody out of the way. Never had such a good time."

Bob McClure has his enemies, as might be expected. But the real obstacles to the work of the parish are not the people, but the conditions under which some of them live.

The average cash income per family in 1940, the year Bob McClure came to Owsley County, was \$393 annually—less than the national average per person. By 1945 it had risen to \$683, and is probably a bit higher now, but the number of families who receive welfare checks helps boost the average.

Most of the mountain families farm land handed down to them from generation to generation; by now the original holdings are so split up that few farms are "family size." Others forced up the mountainside seeking new fertility have left the land useless from erosion and drain-off. Average family size is just under seven persons.

Today, for the nearly 3,000 children of school age in Owsley County there are thirty one-room schoolhouses and the beginnings of a consolidated school system. Not quite half the children are in regular attendance at school; and, if pressed, many parents will admit that they don't think schooling is worth much. Yet many of the children are exceptionally eager to learn. The graduating class in high school usually numbers about thirty.

By way of contrast, when Pastor Boaz Smith first went to Leslie County twenty-five years ago to teach in a Presbyterian mission school, he had to make a day's journey on horseback, up past Hell-For-Certain to Cutshin Creek to reach the place. Until a few years ago, John Turner, the other preacher, and I. H. Gabbard, a retired minister, made all their rounds by horseback.

Now McClure and his helpers drive along the mountain roads in the big blue Dodge and Chevrolet buses—acquired by much penny-pinching—to pick up passengers and carry them to and from church. They each average 1,000 miles a month on wheels.

### ***Modern socializing***

The new roads are not only the biggest boon to Booneville; they also show signs of being the makings of Ows-Lee Parish. Attendance at Travellers' Rest Church, for instance, has doubled since

**Mr. McClure and seminarian Joe Powlas unload boxes of clothing donated to parish to be sold at fraction of actual value to proud but needy persons who want to pay.**







Visiting the Gibson family, McClure can smile at toy-pistol threat. But time was when real guns cracked outside his church services, and the minister silenced them.

the bus service began. Not too long ago McClure told the people there, "You're going to have to start liking each other better before you can build a congregation." The socializing going back and forth on the bus is doing the trick, plus the religious or educational film shown nearly every Sunday after service.

Besides buses, movie and slide projectors, there are other modern features—a mimeograph machine, a portable generator for use where there is no electricity, and a public address system. McClure usually keeps the speakers hooked up on top of the jeep and plays chime recordings along the country roads on the way to church. Once a lady said to him, "That music made me want to go to church so bad." That, of course, is the general idea.

The marks of progress are on the church, just as the church, in turn, has contributed to the progress of the community. Until McClure came along with his idea of banding the fourteen churches together in 1945, most of them were averaging one or two services a month, and had a total membership of 432. Now each church has a weekly service and Sunday school, and regular visitation is made to the school in each community served. Today the fourteen churches have 840 members, 950 in Sunday school.

Then the people gave about \$1,000 for all purposes in a year; in 1950 they gave more than \$5,000, including parish dues. Some of the impetus for increase comes from the power of example; the McClures are tithers. It's a bit of a squeeze on the

missionary's salary even though Mrs. McClure teaches school to help out. If the truth be known, something more than a strict ten per cent goes out for upkeep, tires, and gas for the two cars, and two buses. But McClure considers them a "must."

This past winter, McClure sandwiched in some graduate courses in rural sociology at the University of Kentucky, ninety miles away. He came back deter-

mined to find a way to attack the county's problems at their roots. "We used to talk a church-centered program; now I'm convinced that what we need is a community-centered church program." Ever since he has been there he has been encouraging farmers to get better stock, grow better crops. But he believes firmly in the Presbyterian philosophy of doing a job only until someone comes along to do it better; now John Turner and he are cooperating with the county agent in establishing 4-H Clubs. The Booneville church people have been using the Lord's Acre Plan to raise funds for a sorely needed new church building, in order to serve those reached by its extended program.

### McClure's question

Once somebody asked Bob McClure how he could be satisfied to "throw his life away" in this country parish. In reply he asked a question of his own: "Do you believe in immortality?" When the answer was obviously no, he remarked, "Well, that explains it. If you did, you'd understand why it isn't important where you work. The main thing is to do the thing that needs to be done wherever God can use your abilities to the best advantage."

Meantime, he has a stock answer for these occasional offers luring him to a bigger church: "Do you need me as much as I am needed where I am? When you can show me a place I'm needed more, I'll leave."

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